



Maine Children's Alliance

Advocating for the well-being of all Maine families.

Testimony of Rita Furlow
Maine Children's Alliance
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs
LD 1861
An Act to Reduce Chronic Student Absenteeism
May 9, 2023

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty and Representative Brennan, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Rita Furlow. I am the Senior Policy Analyst at the Maine Children's Alliance. I am providing testimony in support of LD 1861, An Act to Reduce Chronic Student Absenteeism. The Maine Children's Alliance is a statewide non-partisan, non-profit research and advocacy organization whose mission is to promote sound public policies to improve the lives of children, youth, and families in Maine.

We know that regular school attendance results in better outcomes for students. Students who miss significant amounts of classroom instruction are more likely to need remediation to catch up with their peers. These students may also experience more disconnection from their peers causing negative interactions and behaviors.

We also know that good attendance practices need to begin early. When children are chronically absent in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade they are much less likely to read at grade level by the third grade. We also know that students who cannot read at grade level by the end of third grade are four times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school.¹

Data from the 2023 KIDS COUNT data book found that 28.4%, or 48,651 Maine students, were chronically absent in 2021-22. While the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly impacted those numbers, examining earlier data indicates that there was a significant problem in 2018 in Maine with 20.9% of total students being chronically absent. The data also illustrates that students who are economically disadvantaged have much higher rates of absenteeism with 40% of those students missing 10% or more of schools days in year in 2021-22.

We agree that bringing together attendance teams at schools can provide an opportunity for individual schools to monitor their data and identify students who require more support to regularly attend school. Creating a team approach to address absenteeism early can help to ensure there is someone of the team working on personal and family engagement.

Forming relationships early with students and families can help to identify potential barriers that may exist relating to attendance such as health issues, transportation, or housing issues. The attendance teams can also attempt to address barriers to attendance that may be problematic for numerous students, such as before or after care or unique transportation needs, or work with community partners to address other barriers.

Thank you for your attention and consideration.

¹ Hernandez, Donald J., *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*, The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2011). Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/resources/double-jeopardy>

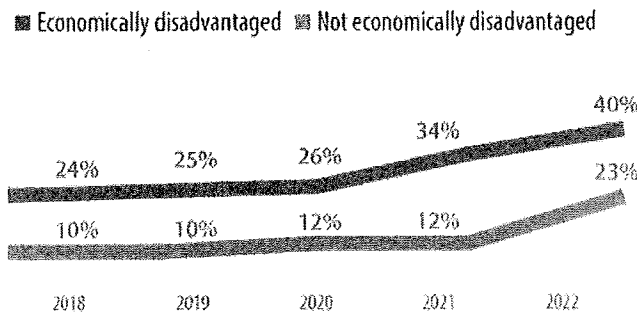


Chronic Absenteeism, defined as missing 18 or more days of school in a year 📄

School attendance is critical to student success

Chronic absenteeism increased from 34 percent to 40 percent for economically disadvantaged students and from 12 percent to 23 percent for other students, as the pandemic affected everyone's attendance in the 2021-2022 school year

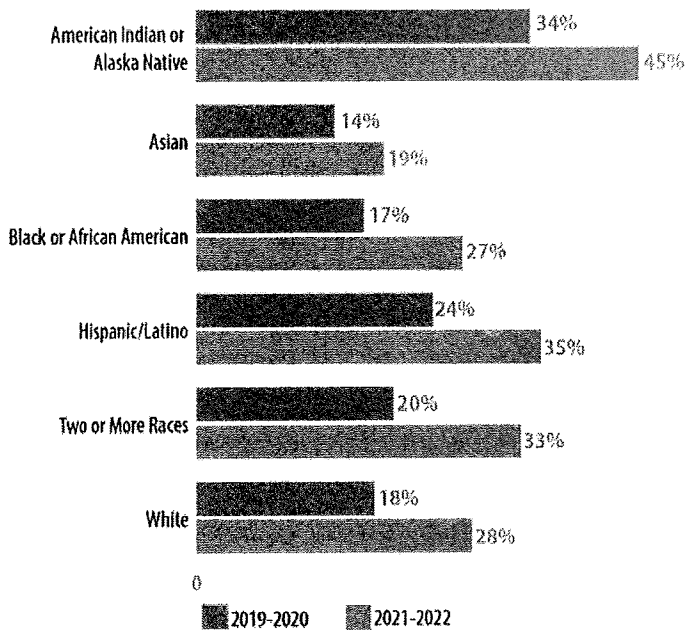
Percent of chronically absent students by economic status¹³



Source: KIDS COUNT chronic-absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism increased 10 or more percentage points for most races and ethnicities

Percent of chronically absent students by race/ethnicity, 2021-2022 compared to two years before, 2019-2020



Source: Maine Department of Education ESSA Data Dashboard

WHY IT MATTERS

Students who regularly attend school have better academic outcomes. When students believe that teachers and other adults care about them they are more likely to feel included and engaged and less likely to be chronically absent.¹⁴

HOW MAINE IS DOING

Due to COVID-19, education was disrupted for multiple years and resulted in increases in student anxiety and depression.¹⁵ In 2021-2022, students often were not able to attend school if they were exposed to COVID-19 and typically there was not a remote school option. Chronic absenteeism was more prevalent for economically disadvantaged students and county data indicates it was also more prevalent in rural counties.¹⁶ Establishing a positive school climate is important to recover from these high rates of chronic absenteeism, as is implementing strategies to work directly with students and families to address specific barriers to regular attendance.

48,651 students were chronically absent in 2021-2022



"Inclusivity in schools to me means no one being left out and everyone feeling that they belong and are safe."

-Student, Cumberland County